



READING JANE EYRE WHILE BLACK

THE PRIVILEGE OF ESCAPISM IS NOT ALLOWED FOR ME

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Like most writers, I read a lot as a kid. "All the book sense in the world and not a lick of common sense," my aunt would complain when, every day after school, I'd drop my bookbag, take off my pants (because escaping to other worlds is best accomplished in your underwear), place my feet flat against my bedroom wall, and commence to leaving this earth via the written word. I read all the classics available from my school's library—*Babysitter's Club*, *Sweet Valley High*—and then the real classics: *Middlemarch*, *The Stranger*, 1984, and, of course, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. Classics where the protagonists looked nothing like me.

My mother, who read yet another kind of classic, went through her own bookish phase with me. Littered throughout her bedroom were the paperbacks of so-called street or urban literature: Omar Tyree's *Flyy Girl*, Walter Mosely's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and most influential for me, Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*. I was then around 13, and I feverishly devoured these books with their sex and adult themes although I had no business doing so. They changed my life, showing me a world that felt dramatically familiar and satiating a hunger I did not know I had: the desire to read about people with skin the same color as mine. Through these books, I learned that stories could be about girls like me, with brown skin, black hair, and brown eyes. That there was more one could write about than just white people.

From then on, I made a conscious choice to envision every character in every book I read as black, regardless of how the author portrayed them. This was a specific decision, something that took a great effort on my part. Before, because of what I now know to be internalized white supremacy and patriarchy, this marginalized reader considered "white" the default in any piece of writing. But after, I concluded that I would not believe in that false vision of the world anymore. I would not subscribe to a narrative that perpetuated the notion that white is standard and black the "other." I would be the master of my own mind and imagination; I would repudiate these long-dead white authors who never imagined my black hands holding their works in the first place.

The switch was easiest to turn on with Jane Austen. Books like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* lend themselves to replacing white characters for black or any other kind of ethnicity because race is absent from the narrative. I don't say this to imply that Austen had some benevolent, modern attitude about being "color-blind"; I don't know what Jane Austen thought about black people other than the attitudes expressed in *Mansfield Park*. Rather, race is not a part of the narrative because Austen's society is so definitively white.

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But for me, this whiteness is more a blank slate rather than an essential character element. It's easy for me to imagine myself as Elizabeth Bennett. As a modern-day black woman, there is nothing in Austen's works that prevents me from picturing myself as any of the characters; the overarching themes surrounding marriage and women's place in society still ring true 200 years later regardless of race.

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This mind mashup becomes trickier, however, when I try it with other 19th-century writers and books, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Race is not only explicitly present in *Jane Eyre*; it is a major evil upon which the plot turns.

A 21st-century reader picks up on racial signifiers early on in *Jane Eyre*. In chapter two, Brontë starts her own trick, one we will see her practice throughout the book, of illustrating untoward and morally corrupt characters in terms of their relationship to nonwhiteness or non-Englishness. She describes Mrs. Reed, a hateful character till the day she dies, as having "dark and opaque" skin. And she writes of John Reed, Jane's spoiled and entitled male cousin, that "... he called his mother, 'old girl,' too; sometimes reviled her for her dark skin, similar to his own ..." Before we even approach Thornfield, the estate where Jane meets Mr. Rochester and falls in love, we are introduced to several characters with dark features and dark hair. This indicates foreignness, that their non-Christian like deviancy in treating the fair and small Jane Eyre with contempt is related to some aspect of their breeding and ancestry.

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I know that these descriptions of dark skin are not being used in the same way we understand that signifier today: to denote characters of color. But it is impossible to entirely divorce yourself from any text you read, despite the time in which the book was written or the antiquity of language. The lens through which you experience a piece of fiction is always your own personal and historical context. It is probably easier to compartmentalize language like this if you are not of the cultural make-up Brontë describes in such abhorrent terms: if you are white. But when reading *Jane Eyre* as a person of color, these accusations segregate the black and white lines of the page; they become bold and glaring; they point a finger at you. They reveal a reality of the time in which they were written that removes you from the fantasy fiction seeks to create.

In the preface to *Jane Eyre*'s second edition, Brontë writes that she intended the novel to serve as an evangelical text. Her choice of villain, however, is a woman of mixed race from the West Indies where slavery had not been abolished during the era depicted. I wonder about Brontë's Christian mission to present a book "whose ears detect in each protest against bigotry—that parent of crime—an insult to piety, that regent of God on earth." This means that Brontë considered Bertha and those other dark and swarthy creatures to be of something other than God. That she would think so of me as well.

This is the conundrum readers of color face when confronting classic literature. Despite the assumptions of canonical writers that people like us would not be reading their works, we *are*, and it isn't always simple to dissociate our reality from the text. I am unable to truly fall under the spell of Brontë's fictional world. The privilege of escapism, which is a fundamental reason that people read fiction, is not allowed for me.

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Jane is an underdog, and I want to root for the underdog. But it is around the point in the novel when Miss Ingram is introduced that I stop championing Jane. I can't. Her jealousy and lack of self-reflection is so unlike my favorite characters that I can no

longer attempt to picture any relationship with her, let alone imagine myself as Jane. Jane has no faults. She acts with dignity and a stern heart. She is so noble and strong-willed. It makes me sick.

The best part about Austen's books, on the other hand, is that the narrative tension is drawn in part from each protagonist's personal shortcomings. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is stubborn and refuses to see Mr. Darcy as anything other than an elitist; she jeopardizes her happiness to save face even when she finds out he isn't as much of a jerk as she once thought. Jane, on the other hand, accepts no fault for her own deficiencies. Her decisions are all predicated on what is right and Godly. It is clear that Brontë sees Jane as an ideal version of womanhood. That version, comely and small, has to be absent of moral imperfections. It has to be white.

But despite giving up on Jane herself, I keep reading *Jane Eyre*. The book is a classic for a reason. I am riveted by the plain language, the slight moments of sexual tension between Jane and Mr. Rochester. I make it past Miss Ingram, past Mr. Rochester dressing up in black-face to play a fortuneteller, a "shockingly ugly old creature . . . almost as black as a crock." I see Jane's illustrations of the vampirish and demonic Grace Poole. I even reach a moment where Mr. Rochester calls Jane a "little niggard" in jest.

And then, I read the descriptions of Bertha Mason:

. . . a woman tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging down her back . . .

Fearful and ghastly to me . . . It was a discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of linaments.

Bertha Mason is mad, and she came of a mad family;—idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard!

. . . a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled . . . on all fours, it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal . . .

It only gets worse. We find out that Bertha gets her madness from her mother, a woman hidden to Rochester when he went to Jamaica and fell in love with the illusion of Bertha presented to him. That illusion was of a refined and rich white woman; he had no indication she came from such savage stock, such “pigmy intellect.”

And then, when Jane has heard Rochester’s story, when she loves and pities him the most, Jane feels, “A wind fresh from Europe” blowing over her. The storm of her mind breaks. She is resolved to leave Thornfield and sacrifice her own happiness.

And I want to throw this book across the room.

Bertha Mason’s madness is predicated on the fact that she is not white. My mental switch—which I think is actually a universal part of the reading experience for everyone, regardless of race—means that I must confront this racist stereotype. Even if I wanted to, I would be barred from ever seeing any part of myself in Jane—because to be Jane would mean to be in direct opposition to myself.

Much has been written about *Jane Eyre* and its revolutionary feminism. But many of these readings are not intersectional. Instead, they promote a particular understanding of white feminism, one that erases women of color and fails to consider the demeaning ways Brontë draws any woman who isn’t white. Any present-day analysis of *Jane Eyre* that does not address the racial complexities of this book is being deliberately dismissive of readers like me. Brontë’s intentions do not trump the effects of the text. To call this book feminist is to forget about me, that I am a reader too, that I am a woman too. That according to Brontë, I am a savage.

Unlike that underwear-clad black girl envisioning herself between the pages of her Penguin Classics, I now have the privilege and option to choose books I don’t have to try so hard to find myself in. I no longer have to participate in the mental gymnastics that were required to turn white protagonists black. I don’t have to read a book like *Jane Eyre* that makes me feel shame for relating more to the demonic, nonwhite villain than the actual heroine.

Instead, I can throw that book across the room. I can travel to another world, a different time, an alternative narrative, where the only thing that is universal is that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

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